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Statement submitted by World Vision International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

Maternal, Newborn and Child Health: Why urgent action is needed to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 4 in times of global crisis

We are concerned about the impact of the financial crisis on the health and survival of children in the poorest communities in the world.

As the financial crisis unfolded over the last year, donors and developing countries alike began to recognize that it could become a devastating social crisis, pushing a further 46 million people deeper into poverty in 2009 alone and taking the lives of an additional 2.8 million children before 2015. It is a worldwide recession that is impacting the most vulnerable countries, affecting those who did not play any part in its making. Concerted action is needed now to get the Millennium Development goals for child and maternal mortality back on track and ensure that current development gains are not lost.

We call on donor governments and developing countries to:

- prioritize children's and women's health in their plans addressing the financial crisis; *and*
- safeguard and expand funding for preventive health care at the primary level to ensure that women and children are more effectively targeted

Experiences from previous economic downturns in countries like Argentina, Indonesia and the Russian Federation have shown that women and children were among the worst-affected as governments were forced to slash health budgets. During times of recession, infant- and under-five mortality rises as fewer children have access to basic health services. At these times, support for preventive healthcare can be sacrificed for the immediate and visible results of curative care.

Its impact is being felt right now – Margaret Chan, Director–General of the WHO, noted that at least seven countries in Africa, are planning to cut their health budgets.[1] Coupled with the current food crisis, the effect on children is clear – they are more likely to be malnourished and susceptible to disease, be forced out of school to work and do without essential health care. In countries where HIV and AIDS and TB rates are high, the impacts will be far greater.

We call on developing countries to:

- adopt comprehensive health strategies based on the principles of primary health care, that grant high priority to community- and district-level maternal, neo-natal and child health and nutrition services for the poorest and most marginalized segments of society; *and*
- Ensure that cost is not a barrier to accessing essential healthcare services for pregnant women and children

Research and on-the-ground experience has shown that low-cost interventions at the community and district levels can prevent three in five child deaths and nearly four in five maternal deaths.[2]

This crisis can provide the opportunity for health reforms that strike the right balance between preventive and curative healthcare, and which benefit the poorest women and children. Investing in primary healthcare is a big step in that direction, through an approach that is based on equity, inclusion of the most poor and marginalized and which recognizes the social and economic determinants of health.

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* Issued without formal editing.

[1] Statement by WHO Director-General, Dr. Margaret Chan, 1 April 2009.

[2] World Vision (2009) Why the G8 matters to children. World Vision International.

We call on donor governments to:

- Fast track aid and budget disbursements for high priority, shovel-ready programs that strengthen health systems and delivery of essential health services to the poorest populations, and scale-up of Preventing Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) services and responses to malnutrition;

- publish a timeline for disbursing aid to meet current commitments; and

- increase development assistance for primary health care programmes that prioritise women and children to at least $15 billion a year by 2010

In developing countries, women and children are among the most vulnerable, and must be immediately targeted and protected from the worst of the economic crisis. Therefore, we welcome the World Bank's commitment to triple its support to US$ 3.1 billion this year to strengthen health systems and improve child and maternal health.

Most donor countries have increased their aid contributions but as they look to tighten budgets, there is a real danger that, going forward, aid commitments may be lowered or actual disbursements may decline. In fact, several are yet to fulfill their promises. The G8 is off-track in its commitment to increase aid to $130 billion per year by 2010.[3] With many poor countries relying on external aid to fund 30% or more of their health budgets, disbursing promised aid is a matter of urgency.

[3] Ibid.